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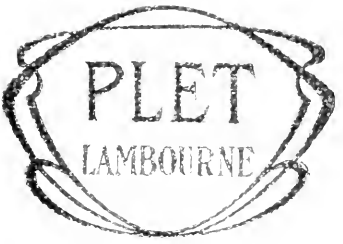

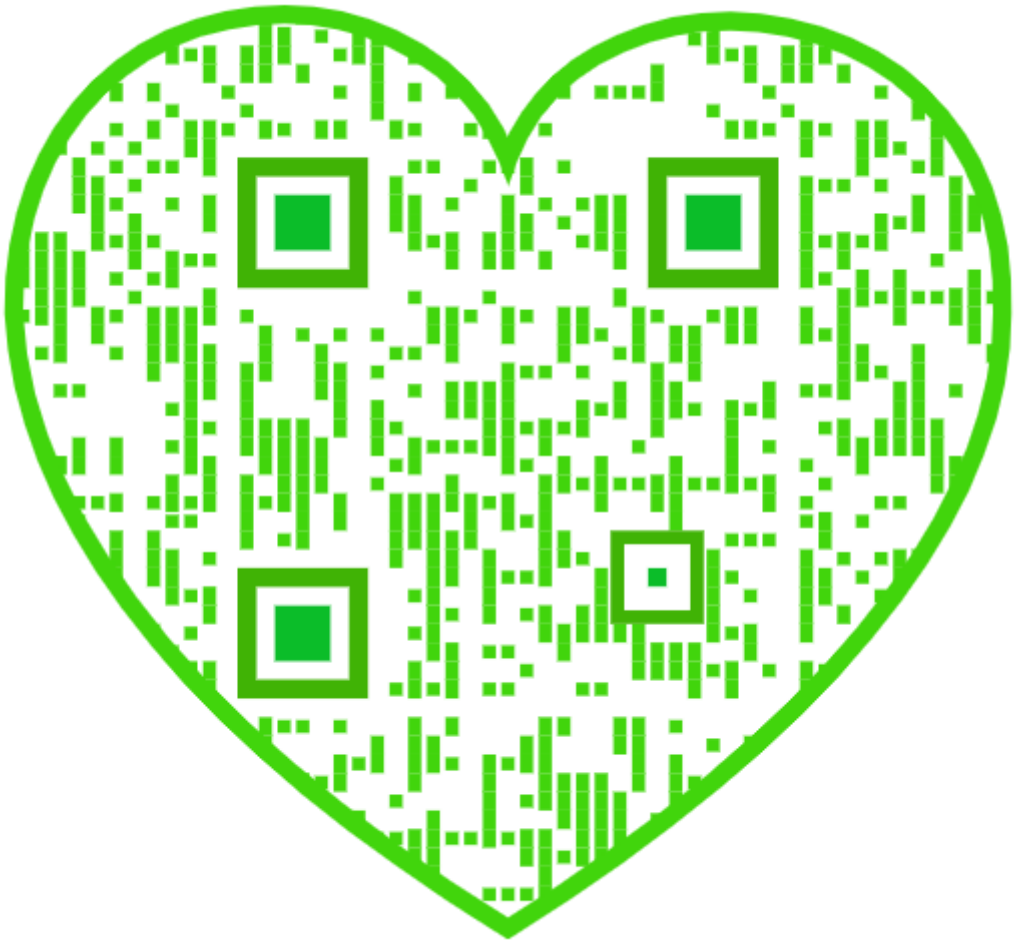

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Book

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PLET: A CHRISTMAS TALE OF THE WASATCH

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A CHRISTMAS TALE OF THE WASATCH

BY

ALFRED LAMBOURNE

NEW YORK
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1906

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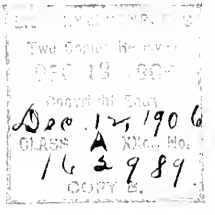

TO
HOLD FROM OBLIVION AWHILE, AND TO PRESENT
TO MY CHILDREN,
THE MEMORY OF HOURS
PASSED AT THE PLACE DESCRIBED HEREIN AS
OUR HOME

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

By HIRAM PUTNAM BARNES

"Our Home stood in a hollow near the mountain top" *Frontispiece*

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PLET: A CHRISTMAS TALE OF THE WASATCH

TALE from out my western life you say?
Something to while the Christmas Eve away;
And something, too, to suit this festal time,
With two old bachelors, long past their prime,
Who as they sip in solitude their wine,
Are filled with memories of Auld Lang Syne?
Well, — I grant it. Yet why did you add,
Something to suit the time? I shall be glad —
But was the last a tongue slip? Let it go.
Still, why I asked, the tale will clearly show.
As I proceed and still you care to hear,
You'll find it suits this night of all the year.

Oh, yes! to fill your wish I'm full inclined,
I need but voice the thoughts within my mind,
And then the task's completed. All comes back
On every Christmas Eve, I never lack
Of food for thought. That time I'll ne'er forget
In future years, though distant may be set
My time for going. When my younger mate —
But why as writers say — anticipate?
You'll find the tale, perhaps, a trifle sad,
When every dictum says it should be glad.
And — hope the last will not astonish you —
Once in a while a little preachy, too.
And mixed with love, a subject — well, heigh, ho!
Something that we are not supposed to know.

PART FIRST

I

RASH! crash!! crash!!! A heavy, thunderous sound,
Re-echoed from the snow-clad mountains round.
Then shrieks and voices hoarse came through the night
And far below we saw the lantern's light, —
It was the slides again! Through misty damp,
We hastened downward to the stricken camp.

The Christmas Eve! Ill time had chosen Fate
To work her will and joy annihilate!
Women and children lay beneath that snow,
And many a bronzèd cheek was touched with woe.
Think not those men who toil amid the hills
Lack generous fire that noble bosom fills.

Their hearts are tender and their hearts are true,
Their sympathies come quick as mountain dew.
I've been at many rescues; seen the tears
Fill manly eyes, when hope came after fears.
Seen cheeks turn pale, as from their prisons deep,
Crushed, lifeless forms were lifted in last sleep:
As some dear comrade, thought past hope, beneath
The hard-pack'd snow, was found to live — to breathe.
Oh, true those brawny delvers of the mines,
Though in their fashion they are rough at times!

Have you ever seen a snow-slide? — No?
Ah! oft I've wished their pictures to outgrow!
I've drunk a drop or two the thoughts to drown,
'Tis hard, sometimes, to keep emotion down.
Soon we had rescued four; and found three — dead;
A father, mother, child. The cradle-head
Stood by the shattered wall, and close there hung —
Not one but felt his heart with pity wrung —
The child's blue, tiny stocking. On the man
Lay the roof-tree; we hardly dared to scan

With sidelong glance the sight. But wife nor child
The snow had marr'd, for still the mother smiled;
The little hands were clasped as if in prayer —
As lispèd words but echoed mother's there,
Or as the thoughts were filled with visions bright,
Of what the eyes should see at dawn of light.
Alas! those eyes would open never more;
How quick their time for smiles and tears was o'er!
The claspèd hands that toy should never lift
Saint Nicholas had brought for Christmas gift.

And so we worked, and ere the darkness fled
Six others we had placed among the dead,
But none we found were living. Nine there lay
All stark upon the snow, that black night's prey.
Where it would end, there was no time to ask,
As steadily we held the grewsome task.
We did our best — I'm over sixty now,
And strife with Fortune early lined my brow —
So I, when overcome with labor sheer,
A lantern held or uttered words of cheer.

At last we reached them — all too late it seemed,
So pale their faces as the cold morn gleamed.
Around the father's neck her arms were flung,
As if in terror from her couch she sprung,
When first upon her ears came, faint and low,
The distant rumble of the loosened snow.
Lovely she lay in her long, broidered robe,
Her brown hair rippling o'er each argent globe
Of her ripe bosom's wealth. A long lash press'd
Silken on either cheek. Even when oppressed
By death's close presence — she was lovely then,
But still more lovely as those days came when
Her cheeks with health were red, and in her eye
The light of friendship shone, and, by and by,
The tender look of love. No wonder Jo
Lost then and there his heart. The girl to know
Was prelude sure to loving. Wonderful
Indeed, had he not loved her. And a full
And generous destiny appeared to say,
You'll stand together on your Wedding Day.
Whene'er I saw them happy side by side,

My foolish heart said, "Jo has found his bride."
Perhaps when heart's for heart, there is a link
We do not understand. I sometimes think
Love called to love from Death's dark portico —
Or else what urged the lad to labor so?
'Twas he who, reverent, raised her in his arms,
All mute at her sweet face and maiden charms.
My full belief it was that from the grave
The girl had come to wed my boy so brave.
But not so fast, old Time has chastened me,
For who can tell what Fate will say, shall be!

Yes, once again the story all revives —
Strange part the Christmas Eve played in their lives!

II

OUR Home — that is our cabin, Jo's and mine,
A single room to dwell in, sleep or dine,
Stood in a hollow near the mountain top,

Where massive walls the blue sky seemed to prop.
A stern, bleak, strange, a lonely rugged place
From whence down-looking one could distant trace
The far-sunk cañon and the ledges damp
That sloped toward the little mining camp.
A Babylonish pile at one end rose
On which lay through the year the spiral snows;
And at the other, lichened, richly mossed,
Inlaid by nature's hand, all wild up-tossed,
A mass of terraces did steeply lean,
While tumbled debris lay these heights between.
And higher still the hoary mountain passed
Into a peak, all naked, pale, and vast;
Bleached into gray, but marked with mineral stain —
The source of which it was our hope to gain.
So thus we tunneled and did slow proceed,
Striving from day to day to reach "the lead."
Across the debris lay a zig-zag track
Our feet had made in climbing up and back.
And 'tween our claim and cabin, lost in sleep,
A mountain lake lay cold, and dark, and deep.

Three years we lived there — in that hollow stern,
The mountain's sights and voices well did learn.
Peered down the ledges sunk in watery gloom,
Beheld the flowers that exhaled rich perfume.
By the lake margin they in myriads grew —
Unfolded there the starry asters blue;
Around each boulder, ere the snow was old,
Came gleaming buttercups in rings of gold;
Where swift the gathered waters fell away,
Forget-me-nots were drenched in crystal spray.
The mimulus, the brush, geraniums bright,
Lit up the shadows with a sunny light.
These sounds we heard — the new-born torrent's [plaint,
The bird-like chirp of hidden squirrel faint;
And others, too, uncanny, savage, wild — [aisled,
The wind that fiend-like shrieked 'mong rocks all
Anon, oh, dreadful sound! the thunder-peal,
When e'en the giant mountain seemed to reel.
Sometimes the echo of a distant blast —
Which sound of promise made our hearts beat fast —
Full many a sound that made our bosoms swell;

Oh, yes, we learned to know the mountains well!

But who was Jo? We met upon the slope
When I, at least, was well-nigh without hope.
I'd struggled long — it was my fate, you see —
Had been held down by dark adversity.
But from the moment I met Jo — 'twas change,
Then from my life began an upward range.
Upon the cliffs of purple, iron-gray,
Heavy and wan, the clouds held fast that day.
The Tower of Babel, in the thick murk gloom'd,
Like to a mighty, spectral shadow loom'd
Dim, black, gigantic, save for lines of snow
Reflected vaguely in the lake below.
And clouds as heavy on the peak did rest,
While vapors white lay wild along each crest.
'Twas ominous truly, but sudden — lo, behold!
The sunbeams darted through the thick enfold.
And then was transformation! 'Twas a sign —
An omen surely good, I did divine.
We stood and gazed in silence. All the moss

Seemed turned to emerald fire by the cross
Of slanting sunbeams. Silver flash they gave
To edge of every shoreward lapping wave.
And then the flowers! As by magic turned,
Each rain-wet leaf as topaz, ruby, burned!
Oh, 'twas inspiring! But why more recite?
Our friendship dated from that glorious sight.
I thought that Fortune dealt anew the cards,
When Jo consented to try luck as "pards."

Nor did I rue it. 'Twas a well-fought game.
Ere that day ended we had staked a claim.
Led by a hope not easy to dispel,
We built our hut by that deep mountain well.
And there we lived. All gloomy thoughts we quelled,
Believed success was in the future held.
Oft we would sit beside our cabin door,
Each chance of winning look at o'er and o'er;
And as we lit and smoked a friendly pipe,
We'd boast how Fortune's hair we'd tightly gripe.
We saw the yellow twilight in the west

Grow dim and fade upon the mountain's breast.
Oft when the lake and crags had turned to jet,
The moon came up and found us watchers yet.
Dear lad, I loved him truly as my life, —
In those three years we passed no word of strife;
I played the father, he was like a son.
Alas! the end to that so well begun!

A curious fact — and why not tell it here?
Though you may think it just a little queer —
I wished when my time came, and I lay dead,
Within that hollow, Jo should make my bed.
In some strange way — I scarce can make it clear,
Nor in my hopefulness should it appear —
That one of us would live to see his mate
The labors of his life there terminate.
And so, in shelter that a dwarfed pine gave
With mental sight I saw my cone-strewn grave.
Yet nothing said to give to Jo distress,
And — let an ending come to this digress —
I wish to make this truth appear quite plain,

'Twas Jo I thought of more than hope of gain.
Brave lad! There shone within his honest eye
A daring will to conquer or to die.
Perhaps 'twas that endeared him to me so,
His fiery youth — and I so tame and slow.
Besides my past had all been a mistake,
While golden promise said to him, Awake!
We started different, I had lost my chance,
The future bade him boldly to advance.
It seemed to me to take but little guess
To know that Jo would make of life success.

III

AND Plet — for later so we found her name —
The very idol of the camp became;
A roguish, wilful, tomboy, sparkling girl,
As ever set a lover's brain awhirl.
Full of all tricks, yet gold without alloy,
The pride of all, and all her father's joy.

And modest, too. Her cheek with blushes burned,
That day we heard how she her pet name earned.
"You see," her father said, in merry mood,
While Plet sought quick our glances to elude,
"'Twas this way," here her face he downward drew,
"We found it well to cut your name in two.
Yes, darling, in those days that now are fled
We Pretty called you, 'Pletty' your lips said.
As Pretty were you, Pletty you became,
And soon would answer to no other name.
But in good time the 'Pletty' came to 'Plet,'
The name we christened you I half forget.
This hair of brown was then all golden curls,
Ere you had grown most naughty of all girls.
Before this time, when you all care repay,
With wicked guiles that turn my old head gray."

Then Plet indulged in charming smile and pout —
That she was "papa's darling" none could doubt.
She was his all upon life's pilgrimage,
A golden letter saved from vanished page,

She promised solace of his closing years,
A hope that came from out a time of tears:
Of children born to him the first and last,
The image of her well-loved mother passed.

Such Plet — whose noble, sympathetic heart
Had others caused to live a better part;
A petticoated, pranksome, daring scamp,
The dainty hoyden of a mining camp.

PART SECOND

IV

O was pure-minded. He possessed a force
That kept him always from the low and
coarse;
If ugly vice and sin upon him frowned,
With head erect he firmly held his ground.
When siren Pleasure spread her silken net
He was not caught, nor made a conscience debt.
They found he was not of their kind — those men,
Who sought the brothel, drink-shop, gambling-den.
No goody-goody — it was known at length
His action came from courage and from strength,
And those who made a test were sure to find
His virtues were not of the meaner kind,
They came from purity and clean desires.

Not lack of passions strong, nor manly fires.

'Twas on a bright and noble summer day,
When fast the winter snow-drifts ebbed away;
The cloudless sky was like a crystal dome,
When Plet and father stood within "Our Home."
All nature blended in one vast, grand hymn
What time their nags came o'er the hollow's rim.
We saw them coming from our perch on high —
How quick the love-light sprang in poor Jo's eye! —
We hastened downward, Jo well on before,
And met them ere they reached the cabin door.
Their nags were hitched beneath a mighty spruce —
One grizzled, storm-worn arm stretched out for use —
And then — Oh! great, indeed, was Plet's delight,
When first she gazed upon the Babel height!
No less the gloom, the aged savageness,
Impressed her fancy than the gorgeous dress,
Brief summer lends to that high altitude
Between the fierce assaults of winter rude.
The solitude upon her senses wrought,

Each novel sight some exclamation brought!
We showed her "Dead Man's Corner," where was found
A hapless miner dead and wrapped around
With the same chilly shroud as on the day,
The ridge he tried — by snow was swept away.
Yet this — although it brought a pretty sigh —
But for a moment put her gay mood by.
The wonders of " Our Home " the girl beguiled
And made her buoyant as a happy child.

Then came a banquet. After that steep ride —
Plet's skill equestrienne none in camp denied —
What better than a tempting dish of fruit, —
So true the wild our mood did try and suit.
The visit to " Our Home " was timely sure,
Those strawberries were fit for epicure.
Among the creviced rocks the plants were spread,
The just ripe berries hanging rich and red;
And these we gathered. At their friendly board,
In every cheer and rich abundance stored,
We often sat. So now we gave our mite,

Their many pleasant favors to requite.
And yet to our desires how poor and mean,
How all inadequate the gift did seem.
And then came out — they seemed to think it sport —
Our two tin plates, it was our only sort.
But Plet's deft fingers quick transition made,
With fresh green leaves in starry pattern laid —
And while she praised the wild fruits' luscious taste
We thought how she our rustic dwelling graced.

The life of the prospector — lonely 'tis!
No venture free from daily hazard his,
But one of steady, hard, and daring toil
He must meet danger, nor from care recoil;
To unforeseen and sudden risks exposed,
No cease from vigil keen his labor knows.
And sudden wealth of all his thoughts the theme,
He works, too, in a sort of waking dream.
Thus the impressions he from nature drew
Results in good and manly impulse true.

Ah! one thing seemed to me exceeding plain —
The sequel showed my fear was not in vain —
That Fate had set for this young pair a trap!
Why, any townish, high-bred, polished chap
Had thought himself in fortune all the while
Could he have shared that day and Plet's sweet smile;
And weighing this — depend upon't 'twas so, —
Think what it was for lonely, honest Jo!
His blue eyes sparkled, one could easy trace
The happy thoughts upon his sunburnt face.
Did it mean joy, or would it bring regret —
Might Jo rue sometime that he e'er saw Plet?
That he had nobly served them, that is true,
They kept the thought nor gratitude outgrew;
He'd striven hard their lives to save, and still —
No matter how full strong his hope or will,
How rich his manly love might prove or pure —
This fact remained, my Jo was very poor.
What right had he to think of such a mate,
One far above him in this world's estate?
But he was worthy of her, free from blame,

Though Fortune played the lad a niggard game!
In spite of every drawback, this I knew,
And hoped the jade would sometime play him true;
For poor or no poor, I could only feel
The chance was good if she but turned her wheel.

Now there's a picture I can ne'er forget;
After these years I seem to see it yet:
The figures you can guess were Plet and Jo,
With background made of rocks, and lake, and snow;
The girl half leaned upon a granite block,
Her roguish smile my poor Jo seemed to mock,
Part pity, part enjoyment, I believe —
What silly stuff I did in my head weave —
And Jo, in timid and in bashful way —
'Twas like a scene I once saw in a play,
Offered a bunch of flowers. And his face,
As he bent forward, not without a grace,
Glowed with confusion and with passion new
As his strong heart and his strong brain were true.
I'd better stop, I grow nonsensical. —

A monster ledge served both for pedestal,
Jo in his earth-stained garments, heavy boot,
Plet in her jaunty hat and riding suit.
Did I admire them so? Why so it seems,
And even an old man has his need of dreams.
A charming picture — so I think, at least,
That couple standing where the wave released
Fell down the mossy rocks in sparkling foam,
The wild flowers growing from the moist, rich loam,
And from the sun and pines mosaic shed
O'er Plet's fair form and Jo's uncovered head.
A landscape setting, beautiful and grand!
The purple epilobiums in Jo's hand —
Frail, tender blossoms, delicate and sweet,
How strange to see them in that wild retreat! —
Were fitting emblems, in their sudden birth,
To soft enwrap and gladden the cold earth,
Of that sweet office a true love fulfils,
Whose wondrous budding all the being thrills —
Of that enchantment grown between those two,
The fond desire their hearts together drew!

V

AFTER that day to Jo there came a change,—
Not that I thought the fact so very strange—
For love had come, oh! that was plain to see,
And from the first I felt 'twas a decree.
I knew Jo found a heart that Plet had lost,
And only feared their love might be ill-crossed.
Perhaps the boy was not without his hopes
The eve that Plet returned adown the slopes.
Now he abstracted grew and walked alone,
To fits of silent reverie was prone.
That he had been a talker don't constrain,
Jo never was a glib-tongued rattle-brain.
For hours in silence to his work he'd stick,
Wielding the heavy hammer or the pick;
And I'll confess that I myself kept still.
No time to talk much, holding to the drill.

But at those times that we'd a moment quit,
And pass a word to cheer us up a bit,
I noticed that his speech was but to ask
Concerning work — some detail of our task.
And evenings, too, as moody as a churl
He'd sit and watch his pipe-smoke upward curl.
Sometimes his gaze on vacancy he'd fix, —
And well I knew the young god played his tricks, —
And if I spoke, some thought wished to impart,
'Twas all unheard, or answered with a start.
What all this meant — who could mistake the sign?
'Twas plain to see as three times three are nine.

So at our claim we kept; he worked as though
A wealth must come, whether it would or no.
A new life dwelt within my partner's breast —
If my prayers answered, then 'twas surely blessed —
But in that present 'twas a torture, too.
His question was — what course can I pursue?
Were not his hopes but built upon the sand —
Could one so poor expect to gain Plet's hand?

And constantly this thought his brain did seize —
Had not sweet Plet been used to every ease?
This truth stared out — a common miner he, —
Alas! for him, a rich man's daughter she!
So his dark moods I clearly understood,
Persistent thought that all would end in good.
Pretending not to see, I smoked my pipe,
And thought, I'll live to see the time grow ripe.
In proper time I knew that Jo would speak,
As in the twilight I would watch him seek —
To him I guess 'twas fairest of all bowers —
The spot where he had offered Plet the flowers.
Oft when eve's shadows deepened into nights,
He'll look adown the slopes and watch the lights
That we could see within the distant camp,
Hoping, I knew, to see one special lamp —
Which hope was more than frequent not in vain —
The one that burned behind Plet's window pane.
Yes, he had grown as fond as any dove;
Beyond a doubt, poor Jo was deep in love!

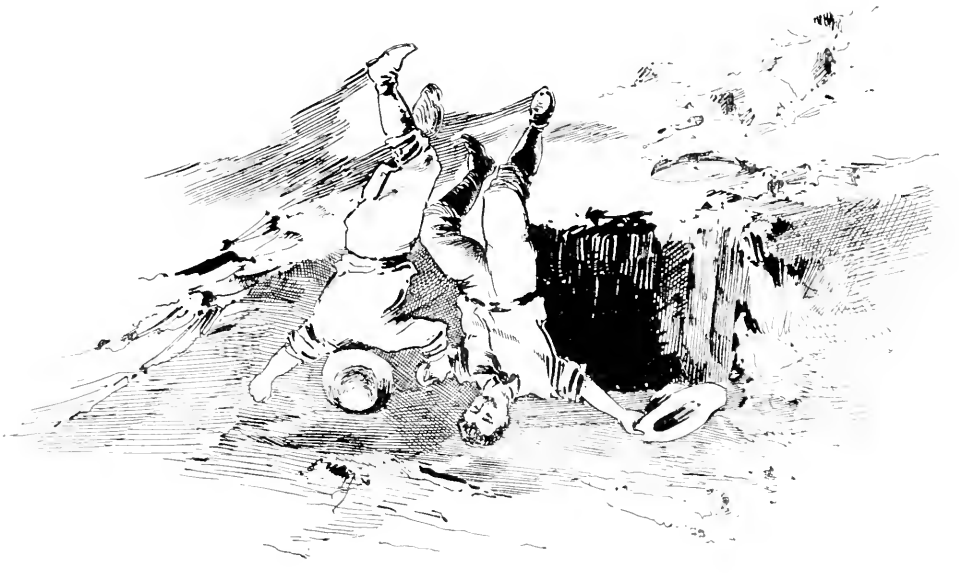
VI

HURRAH! hurrah! And true beyond a doubt!
Hurrah! hurrah! Had we not cause to shout?
She turned her wheel, the changeful, fickle witch;
Yes, beyond doubt, we too had "struck it rich"!
The blind lead we had followed many a day,
Suddenly widened to the best of "pay."
'Twas purest carbonates. We had enough,
Thousands were ours in that black, gritty "stuff"!

How did it serve us? You are bound to ask,
How did we take that climax to our task?
'Twas hard to answer. As I said before,
Jo looked at wealth as though he'd force the door.
But when he saw the end so near him lie,
He dazed appeared and heaved a heavy sigh.
Jo seemed as one just woke from sleep, and — well,
As though a burden from his shoulders fell.

And unto me it came as a surprise;
We stood and stared with dry and eager eyes.
A pan of dirt we picked and carried where
Our brows could feel a touch of cool, fresh air.
I felt my temples throb, my eyeballs burn,
My blood alternate ice or fire turn;
I well remember how we held our breath,
Talked hushed and low as in a house of death.
And then we shouted — shouted long and loud,
Shouted as though with brazen lungs endowed;
Shouted until each voice was weak and hoarse,
Until the wild bird fluttered in his course;
Shouted until our friends in gray and tan —
Across the rocks the fat ground squirrels ran;
Until, as though he'd like to join the game,
An answering echo from "Old Babel" came.

Nor was that all, I'm half ashamed to tell
The things we did beneath that sudden spell —
For then we danced; yes, danced and danced again,
'Till I from weariness to rest was fain!



Had any seen us they had thought us mad,
And frenzy sure possessed myself and lad,
For I worn out, then Jo he danced alone,
His yellow ringlets to the free winds thrown.
With eyes aglow, all filled with sparkling fire,
He danced as though his limbs would never tire;
In weird fantastic measure and wild tread
He waved the precious dirt around my head;
It seemed one could in his wild antics trace
A likeness to some genie of the place.
A wild delirium o'er our senses came
In which the sunshine looked like silver flame;
The rocks, the flashing wavelets, silver seemed;
Each far-off cloud a silver palace gleamed.
Transmuted all to our excited ken —
Yes, silver, silver; all things silver then!

How suddenly for us the world was changed;
For us who every field of want had ranged, [rock,
Who through long months had fought the stubborn
Met summer tempests, borne the winter's shock.

Now the long struggle, the grim fight was o'er,
Privations hard would be our lot no more.
No weary toiling up or down the slope,
Or weary hours in cold and damp to grope.
What figures that strike meant, we hardly knew,
We were among the very lucky few!

Then came reaction — to myself I mean —
For more or less my life had failure been.
What truly, after all, the strike to me!
Such as it was you can at once foresee —
A life of toil replaced by one of ease,
Such things of life as can an old man please.
You see I'd grown to be a sort of sage,
Had weighed full carefully the wants of age.
And can a sudden flood of wealth atone
For years of crabbed single life alone?

With Jo 'twas different. My plans were few,
With him life lay before — so much to do.
'Twere hard to tell what busy thoughts he kept,

What dreams that night came to him as he slept,
What schemes and plans he up-built prodigal —
Of course providing that he slept at all,
And that was doubtful. Perhaps I knew,
Or thought they were the same as those that drew
His feet toward the mossy torrent head,
The same as made him watch for pale light shed,
Toward the ridge from out the mining camp,
And see a message in a far-off lamp:
The same for many a day his brain beset,
For Jo's muttered thoughts were all of Plet!

VII

BUT on the course of love I will not dwell,
Or many an episode I'd have to tell.
'Tis hope and courage to the lover bring
A boldness strong as is the eagle's wing.
And Jo waxed bold, you know the reason why,
He had a cause his hope to justify;
Love progressed fast as ship with wind and tide,

Plet

Ere the snow flew Plet was a promised bride.

"Marry in haste and slow repent you say —
Courtships too quick are somewhat the same way"?
I thought not so, 'twas no ill-mated pair,
The father of Jo's worth was well aware:
Before the day on which our good luck came,
I knew his thoughts of Jo were just the same
As when the fickle maid began to smile —
In mining parlance, when we'd made our "pile."
A pair of good discerning eyes he had,
That looked quite through the soul of my poor lad;
He'd seen the worth behind rough garb and lot,
And what he'd seen a friendship true begot,
A generous heart within his bosom burned,
And friendship soon to admiration turned.
While Plet — I'll try my words not to repeat —
Had danced along love's path with willing feet,
The flamèd barb was not a whit more slow
To reach her heart than it had been with Jo;
And thus before a year had slipped away,

The smitten pair had named a wedding day.
But ten months more was added to his life,
And Jo saw coming — Fortune and a wife.
What comfort 'twas to be no longer poor —
To know a wife of his need not endure
Such trial as oft he saw some miner's mate
In patient silence bear from morn 'til late.
Oh! Jo, I thought, was sure of happiness,
And haven fair and safe from storm and stress;
For thought of other ending I was loth,
My prayers for them were — May God bless you both!

A few short weeks our lives might be the same,
Of course we'd not deserted yet our claim,
'Twas necessary we remain until
Such time as would our obligations fill,
And while the drill was sent or the pick drove,
Like lusty weeds our expectations throve.

Then still and tranquil grew the autumn days;

Through hazy veils the trees began to blaze;
The mountain summits seemed to sleep and dream;
Of tawny richness was each lessened stream;
Transparent amber on the birches crept;
Orange and madder o'er the dwarf oaks swept:
Upon the maples, in ravine or dell,
A myriad shades of rose-carnation fell;
The aspen groves, a wonder to behold,
Strewed the dark rocks with leaves of paly gold;
Wherever bunch of height — fond foliage grew,
Each frosty night had set some splendid hue,
And far above, beyond the somber pines,
The wasted snow yet gleamed in argent lines;
On every slope and steep, afar and near,
A seal was set that marked a dying year;
The mountains glowed in endless, gorgeous dyes,
With pomp of woods and glory of the skies.

PART THIRD

VIII

HE hollow huge, where lay the dark lake cold,
Had once been, so my observations told,
The head of a great glacier thick and vast,
Whose icy masses, in the years long past,
Had with its motion, ponderous and slow,
Ploughed out the narrow cañon far below,
And as it downward moved with growl upon,
Smoothed the long granite ledges 'till they shone.
No doubt the causeway, half the cañon's length,
Was by the monster piled up in his strength;
His bristling front and ice-caves rested there,
Ere he retreated to that upper lair.

Now the wild hollow sees tremendous slides,
That often fall concurrent from its sides.
With force resistless and with thunders loud
They beat the lake into a misty cloud,
Or out of their deep bed the waters sweep,
To pass in hissing floods adown the steep.
Thus once had Jo and I beheld them fall,
A sight and sound the stoutest to appal.

'Twas more than once there came to me a thought,
Why tempt adversity more than one ought?
Our cabin — did it stand in place quite safe,
Would Providence our welfare still vouchsafe?
The cabin stood on a low ridge or mound
That heretofore the slides had passed around.
So I believed that they would do once more —
I did not see the shadow at our door —
And then — the time was brief we had to stay,
We thought that quick — and it would pass away.

Procrastination — 'tis the miner's bane!

To wait, put off, to loiter, he is fain;
He stubborn is and, whether right or wrong,
Keeps to his moods and faces odds too long;
Oh! only beck and voice of Chance he heeds,
And follows blind and deaf where'er she leads.

The golden autumn days had sudden end,
And darkly wild we saw the storms extend;
With chilly notes November's wind piped loud,
Along the mountain side the tall pines bowed;
From out ravine and glen and bushy aisles,
The crispèd leaves were heaped in russet piles;
Or without moment's pause or respite given
Were in the pale, swol'n torrents fiercely driven.
Then came the masses of dull, leaden cloud,
That like gray specters did each other crowd;
Cold drenching rains fell in the vales below,
But on the mountains changed to heavy snow.
With winding sheet it did all things efface;
The heights above " Our Home " grew white apace:
On earth was whiteness, on the sky was frown;

By day and night the flakes were wafted down;
Swirled round and round and wildly drifted o'er
Until it seemed the steeps could bear no more,
And in vast combs, along the winding wall,
The avalanche hung poised for instant fall!

IX

'TWAS night, and seated by our cabin board
We listened to the wind that shrieked and roared,
If we had erred 'twas now beyond reform —
We were held fast by reason of the storm.
For one whole week it raged without allay,
Nor sign had come that it would yield its sway.
Yes, fairly through our rashness we were caught,
And I to blame, for I was better taught:
The blasts still came, the snow unceasing fell,
Our log-built hut became a citadel.
Across the hollow, we could hear them rave,
And more and more my judgment I misgave;

Hurled wild against the walls each wintry corps,
We hardly dared to open once the door.

And that night too! That night of all the year —
How very strange sometimes decrees appear!
A twelvemonth since we'd saved his future mate,
And now poor Jo touched by the hand of fate!
Strange, strange indeed, that it should happen then —
You see it was the Christmas Eve again!

With feet upon the stove my poor boy sat,
I'd tried to help his mood with this and that;
Our miner's lamp down from a huge beam hung,
And o'er our cheerless room its rays it flung.
Within his hand Jo, listless, held a book,
But half the time his eye the page forsook;
He could not read and yet a silence kept —
What meant that change that o'er his features crept?
There was in his pale face too strange a blend,
I did not like whate'er it might portend;
So by the red and dim uncertain light

I watched his face and heard how wild the night;
My head was leaned in thought against my bunk,
I own I was in dark forebodings sunk —
For once since I had met him I was blue,
That we were there appeared great cause to rue.
To keep this fact from Jo's quick sense I tried,
With cheery words my inmost thought belied;
But now by dull, cold fear I felt assailed,
Before some power invisible I quailed.

A strange world this! How full of woe and weal,
What play of fate and chance our lives reveal!
Our lightest word may prove a dread command,
The balance turns with a mere grain of sand;
We do that trifle; and go here or there,
Speak or keep silent, — joy bring or despair!
One moment's action may prove as a knife,
The thread to cut and make or mar a life!

As thus I mused — what had I done for Jo?
Sudden he spoke — "'Twas right that we should go,"

It startled me, — his words were but a chime;
'Twas clear our thoughts unspoken had kept time:
Who should he think of now if not of Plet?
Oh! how she would at his forced absence fret!
The yester-morn 'twas his desire to start,
But I, the elder, played the cautious part;
To try the slopes too dangerous did appear, —
To me the thought itself was madness sheer.
Why, could we in such storm have kept our breath?
It would have been a challenge sent to death.
Yet now, so strong my mood within me wrought.
I would have ventured without moment's thought.
Would I have done so! Then I'd blameless been;
Another end — but that was all unseen!

Ere I made answer, Jo had spoke again —
I was surprised and troubled at his vein —
His spoken musings saddest tenor bore,
There was a break, too, from his words before: —

Strange question surely with so sad a brow —

"What should prevent my being happy now?
Oh! Yes, I know what power the rich command;
I've seen the true and brave hard want withstand;
My sister, dead — Ah! even as I speak,
I see again her flushed and wasted cheek.
Yes, she was working for the sweaters then —
Most brutal, mean, and sordid of all men —
It killed her! Yes, she slowly drooped and pined,
Sunk 'neath her load and mother's loss combined;
Her task was all too great, nor bold nor strong,
An orphan left amid the heedless throng.
Oh! I was nothing but an urchin small,
My help was little, if 'twas help at all;
'Twas cruel, cruel that she suffered so;
On my account I know she feared to go.
She shared her little when she ill could spare;
Would that with her my hope I now might share.
What happiness it would to me impart,
Could she but live and heal again her heart.
My mother, too, — to me her face is dim —
It fills my mem'ry like some vague, sweet hymn —

Yet though I cannot see her face aright,
I feel her dark eyes look in mine to-night."

My Jo was sad indeed and sore oppressed,
His happy prospects did not bring him rest;
And I, too — I was filled with cold alarm,
Some premonition of impending harm!
I felt a warning through my being creep,
And he sat brooding as I fell asleep.

X

CRASH! crash!! crash!!! — O God, what awful roar!
It bursts upon my hearing ever more!
A rush, a fury; sudden, bitter cold;
Confusion utter on my senses rolled;
A rending, grinding; hiss of sliding snow;
Enormous mixing of dread sounds below;
A noise terrific, wonderful and vast,
As though of earthly things it told the last;

Like trump of doom it seemed to rend the sky,
And turn the brain to numbness ——
Where was I?
Half stunned I sat bolt upright in my bunk;
My head swam round as if I had been drunk.
The sudden noise had ended, all was still,
And yet a tremor did the darkness fill;
Our lamp still burned, a red spot in the gloom,
But all was chill and silent as a tomb.
I was too dazed, too lost to understand,
Yet felt the snow drift on my face and hand.

I called aloud to Jo. No answer came.
I called, again, again, and 'twas the same!

What was it? Where was Jo? What did it mean?
What meant that vacancy where Jo had been!
His bunk was empty, and the stove was — where?
Was that Jo's hat upon the table there?
In sort of dreamy spell I stared and asked,
But to the answering felt myself o'ertasked.

Why did our cabin wall so whitish grow —
Why did it look so very much like snow?
In distance, too, I saw it slow expand,
And still I felt the snow on face and hand.

Then I was wide awake! My mind was cleared —
Oh, all too plain the dreadful truth appeared! [slides!
The slides! the slides! "Our Home" was wrecked by
And there was terror in this thought besides —
My Jo? Ah! God of Mercy! where was Jo?
Did he lie bleeding on the rocks below? [half —
"Our Home" was struck, there but remained the
Oh, then I seemed to hear the dark fates laugh!
Not one thing touched or moved where I had lain,
And Jo, perhaps, hurled down to ghastly pain.
Down, down the slopes he had been whirled away,
Ere this it might be — was but lifeless clay:
Was that a voice that called on me to come,
While I stood there in anguish, terror-dumb?

Outside the wreck — when I stood there at last,

The storm rolled back — as if in mockery passed;
A scene of desolation, weird and white,
Beneath the parting clouds fell on my sight;
Like to a lamp the moon hung wan and pale,
As though it lit the path through death's own vale.
My pair of snow-shoes from the wall I took —
Jo's hung there with them on the self-same hook —
Then to my belt a miner's lamp I tied,
Seized the long pole that would my steep course guide;
Though frantic in my fear, all desperate,
I must my acts in order regulate.
Well that some little skill I could command,
Well that I knew each foot of mountain land;
Or never could I, had it not been so,
Have reached the spot where I, at last, found Jo.

The snow was wildly drifted; rocks were bare,
The white blown from them to make mounds in air;
The surface here all soft and loose did feel,
Here 'twas hard-packed and smooth as polished steel.
The slides had met above — there had been two —

Their mighty tracks stretched upward full in view;
Where they had joined in fierce and deadly shock
Was piled on high the tons of shattered rock.
One had possessed a greater power and force
And drove the other from its downward course—
You see how all conspired to change our luck —
That swerve was why the cabin had been struck;
And far below, in a small valley penned,
The rushing snow was forced to make an end,
A level space with rocks all jagged and sharp,
The first uplifting of the counterscarp.
If Jo against those cruel rocks was borne,
Oh, then, I knew, was come my time to mourn!

And hidden dangers it was mine to face,
A moment, I believe, I asked for grace;
Then without pause I glided down the slope,
In that hot fire that burns 'tween fear and hope.
I knew not where to pause or where to look;
The awful wreckage all my courage shook;
He might be crushed by boulder or tree-trunk,

Or out of reach in some ravine be sunk.
Each object dark that on the surface lay
Plucked at my heart and filled me with dismay.
What likely seemed within the shadows dim,
I hoped, yet dreaded, that it might be him!

What were those timbers sticking through the snow?
I hardly dared another glance bestow.
Ah! what were they it needed little proof,
'Twas splintered fragments of our cabin roof:
And what was that black something lying there?
'Twas Jo's great coat that hung upon his chair.
Was he, then, somewhere near? Oh! could I save?
One choking thump I felt that my heart gave,
Then in my bosom it was turned to lead.
Where was he? Was he yet alive — or dead?

XI

QUITE dead! All hopeless — my poor Jo was dead!
Yes, all too soon I knew that life had fled!
Oh! not the slightest flutter at his heart;
No warmth to his cold lips could I impart;
I could not bring the breath to my poor mate,
I'd found him; but, ah, God! I'd found too late!

Oh! what I suffered I can never tell,
It seemed to me I tasted then of hell!
Despair came o'er me, I was dazed with grief,
As palsy struck I trembled like a leaf.
Would I go mad? Yes, without thought or aim,
I smoothed Jo's brow and called upon his name;
Strange and unnatural my voice with woe,
And lost at once amid the wreaths of snow!
Should I feel shame that grief did me unman —

That down my furrowed cheeks the hot tears ran?
That night I learned what friendship true can be;
How near a son the lad had been to me.
Before that hour no gray my locks o'er cast,
And after that the white came thick and fast.

'Twas by the wreckage, some ten yards away,
And near the surface that my poor boy lay,
One hand thrust upward, as in mute appeal.
Alas! my frenzied clasp he could not feel!
Upon his other hand each fingernail
Furrowed the flesh, did deep the palm impale.
Oh, it was grewsome! Oft I've seen it so,
Upon the hands of those killed by the snow.

What could I do — when bitter tears and grief
Passed to a dull despair beyond relief?
When I was sure that I all power did lack;
That tears and labor could not bring him back?
Must I make ready for a solemn task —
The end of which I dared not see nor ask?

Dimly, through all the rack of ache and pain,
I knew the truth — Jo could not there remain;
And then the thought upon my brain dawned slow,
That I must take him to the camp below.

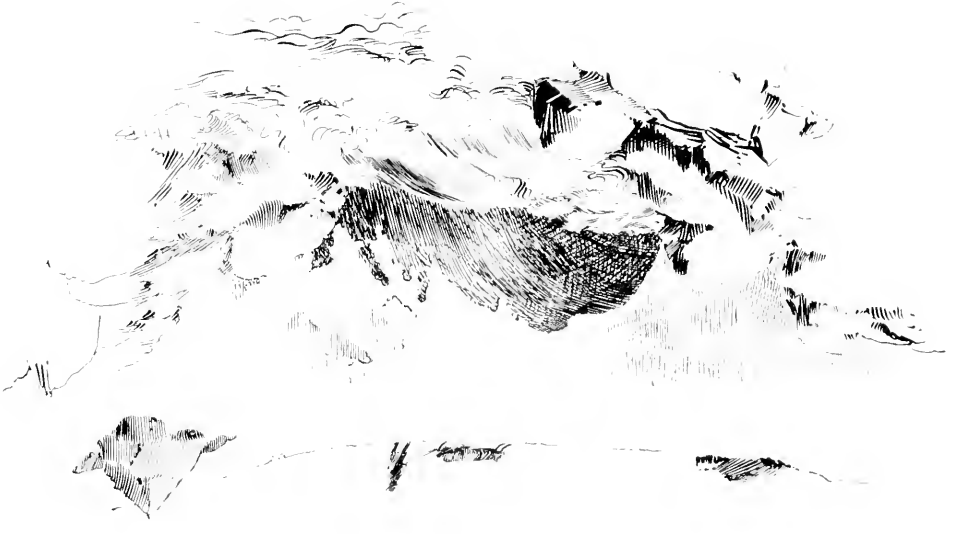
Oh! friend, who listens calmly to this tale,
Did it show weakness that my heart should fail?
That I before the coming task did shrink —
Held back as one upon a chasm's brink?
"Not so," you say? I hope in all the sum
Of your life's days such task may never come!

Close by our cabin we had kept a sled,
Thereon awhile poor Jo must find a bed.
Oft he had pulled beside me on the slope —
Brave, honest Jo, when he was filled with hope;
Now he would be the burden it must bear.
Hard pang it gave to go and leave him there;
Lying so rigid, lonely and so still,
He did with fearfulness the wild scene fill!
I seemed to see all nature through a pall,

A sign of death was written over all, —
Life, hope, fate, death; the helplessness of men —
The mystery of all weighed on me then!

Across the sled I laid pine-branches deep,
Placed Jo upon them in his endless sleep;
With his own blankets wrapped the body o'er —
Under their folds he'd dream of love no more —
And when I'd fitting made his bed at last,
With long, stout cords I tightly bound all fast;
Felt one deep surge of pain my breast within,
And, then — my course was ready to begin.

Then downward; downward, in pale light of dawn,
Down the steep slopes and ledges long outdrawn.
Over the snowy hillocks, mighty drifts,
Across ice-bridges o'er the deep-made rifts,
Down, down the hidden trail we knew so well —
Within my ears a sound like passing bell;
My heart like fire, my throbbing brow cold-damp,
As, in the wintry noon, I reached the camp.



Oh, awful hour! My task of tasks came yet,
Ah, God! how could I bear the news to Plet?

XII

FEAR not, — I shall not tell of all the woe,
The misery Jo's death did clear foreshow.
Why should I try those dark hours to recall,
Dwell on the blank that fell upon us all?
O regal Death, you wear a changeful crown,
You come with gentle smile or tyrant frown!
We know sometimes with terror you assail,
Or to sweet rest you touch the eyelids pale:
That to the living, from your unseen train,
Too oft remorse doth bring its aching pain,
And to the sorrows that bereavement brings,
The earthly needings like a horror clings.

Too dreadful was the time between the day
I reached the camp and he was laid away.
Yes, I have lived through saddened hours and dark,

Known trials that on life have left their mark;
I've my own share of keenest anguish seen,
For all too soon my life had failure been;
I knew what 'twas to miss the hoped-for goal,
And feel the iron enter in my soul;
Yet only then I saw all hope depart,
To come no more when Jo received death's dart;
And still more black became the gloom profound,
Between that hour and the burial ground.

Her father told her — how I do not know.
When I told him, he reeled as from a blow;
I did not dare to go and look on her,
Of tidings evil I the messenger.
Yet later in her sorrow I could share
When in the dusk we took Jo's body there.

A dreary, dreary, winter day was that,
Deep lay the snow upon the lonesome flat;
Slowly the big white flakes were falling round,
And in a deeper shroud the hills enwound.

You should not think the hands of friends forgot
To dig a pathway to the chosen spot.
Slowly through white the black procession passed,
And stood beside the open grave at last.
Plet, speechless, tearless, to her father clung,
A sight so pitiful each heart was wrung.
By one most worthy a few lines were read,
In simple service for untimely dead.
The end was reached when, like a sudden knell,
The clods all frozen on the coffin fell.

Nor was there lack of kindly effort made
To ease the grief on her so heavy laid.
All in the camp had hunger in their heart
To her some grain of comfort to impart;
But such her feeling that they must forego,
And leave her silent in her utter woe.

XIII

AND after that all is to me quite vague,
My memory seemed smitten by a plague;
A strange uncertainty did all confuse,
Things and events I saw through changing hues.
My merry Plet, sweet as the sun shone on,
I saw like a cut flower all droop and wan,
Or one that's stricken by a cruel frost,
Or like a weary bird, that's tempest-tossed.
She who had been so lively and so gay
Changed to a spirit that might pass away.
How soon the dawn of love so rosy bright
Had given place to dark and solemn night!
Her only wish now seemed to be alone,
To listen for a word in that loved tone —
Yes, she who longed to meet the future years,
Now backward looked and through a mist of tears.

And doubt and fear obscure oppressed my brain,
My mind was clouded by a nameless pain,
And o'er and o'er again came this dark thought,
She too must go — she but a long rest sought;
On other paths than ours she soon must wend,
Her broken heart foreshadowed but this end.

Her father wished to take her from the place,
But Plet begged hard for little time of grace.
He to remove her from those scenes was fain,
She to look on them still would there remain.
How could she go and leave that new-made grave,
When, to be near, her only comfort gave?
Ah, all unlike is woman to the man!
And yet we know 'tis to some noble plan —
Man in his strength, the past lets go its way,
Though thus forever some great hope decay!
But woman, loving, tender, still clings fast,
And hopeless yearns until the very last;
Keeps sacred in her heart and holds supreme
Whate'er remains of her sweet broken dream.

And so that grave held Plet with unseen power.
Was there some influence at their natal hour?
Oh, yes, to me the sequel seemed to show
That they were linked indeed for weal or woe!

And so there came again a summer day,
With Plet and father climbing up the way.
What madness filled his brain to let her come?
The very sight with anguish struck me dumb.
I knew she struggled with her love in vain,
'Twas hopelessness that brought her once again.
The same wild flowers were growing by the lake,
As when she first came for my poor Jo's sake.
Can the eyes speak farewell? Oh! if they can,
How simple was the key to her sad plan.
She only came with her dead hope to part,
To be where love had entered in her heart!

And now there came that looked-for scene and last,
To which that other seemed but a forecast;
Once more the great white flakes were falling slow,

To wrap in fleecy folds the earth below.
A year with all its changes had gone round
Since Jo was buried in that mountain ground,
The third of that glad season since they met,
And now I saw the grave close over Plet.

For he had promised — kept the promise true,
Nor death nor circumstance should part those two.
And now that vow the stricken father made,
We with bowed heads in silence saw obeyed.
Her happiness had been his own, and why
Should he her last and fondest wish deny?
And that last wish had almost been a prayer,
That she might lie beside her lover there.

The Christmas Eve — it weighed upon my heart,
It seemed the hot tears from my eyes must start;
In anguish o'er my brow I passed my hand,
Life seemed no surer than a rope of sand:
The Christmas Eve with dire importance fraught,
Plet and her father 'neath the wild snows caught;

The Christmas Eve and Jo swept to his death,
Upon the jagged rocks to yield his breath,
And Christmas Eve again, and Plet asleep,
Where on the flat the snow lay cold and deep.
The Christmas Eve, I whispered o'er and o'er,
While echoes seemed to come from a far shore.
Oh, why so fateful to them was that night —
Why did it always bring so sad a plight?
I tried an answer to my words to frame —
But no solution to the question came;
I choking struggled with the hopeless task,
And life for death did only seem a mask;
I felt all hope was but sad pretence when
Their voices I should never hear again!

FINALE

XIV

LL stuff and nonsense! Never hear them? What!
Their voices hear no more? Believe it not!
How! Voice of Jo or Plet not hear again?
Indeed! Pray whose voice was I hearing then?
Whose voice was that — bright, joyous, full and clear —
A voice that rang with every note of cheer!
Whose voice, indeed, if not the voice of Jo? —
And you'll concede I was the one to know.
My dear boy's voice as lusty as of old, —
Oh, no, he was not 'neath the graveyard mold!
His voice I heard proclaim it was the morn,
The sun was shining and the storm outworn —
And then, ere I could drink my happy cup,
Cut my thoughts short with orders to "get up!"

So all those things so dreadful were not true —
'Twas but a nightmare I had just passed through:
It was not fact our cabin had been struck,
No end so sad had come to mar our luck!
All false those hours upon the mountan side;
Jo's body down the slopes I did not guide;
He was not dead, nor Plet! It did but seem;
All a mistake, then, nothing but a dream!

Thank God it was so! That the heaped-up snow
Ourselves and cabin had not hurled below,
That there was One of Mercy that did spare,
Although ourselves had entered in the snare!
Thank Heaven, again, 'twas but Jo's mournful word,
To tragedy in my weak head transferred!

You know what governs in a Christmas Tale —
That joyfully to end it must not fail, —
So as this life page I was telling you,
Such end of course I always kept in view.
To take the actual from the false apart,

You see it really needs but little art —
Such right as others take, I did but claim,
If I have pleased you, then I've gained my aim.

Oh, all unlike our trip upon the slope,
To that one of my dream bereft of hope!
The wintry sun had driven back the night,
All glistening lay the snow beneath his light.
As we sped downwards in unbounded zeal
Our snow-shoes sent the spray from off our heel,
The mountain hare, behind some bank cowered low,
We sent in scurry wild across the snow.
You never then had truly guessed my years,
That I was mad with gladness plain appears!
Jo's hot young blood in me seemed to have place,
And merrily with him I kept the race.
To see them stand together, O, what joy —
Plet all in smiles beside my darling boy;
To hear the music of her gentle voice
Made every fiber in my heart rejoice.
They looked like pair upon some antique vase,

My Jo all strength, and she all sweetest grace.
And when I thought, instead of grave and shroud,
It was the bridal feast, I laughed aloud!

And what a feast it was, too, when it came;
In that high camp you'll find it still has fame!
From lonely spots the guests came far and wide,
And Plet, indeed, was lovely as a bride.
You'll guess, of course, as best man I stood there,
And heard " Good Wishes " heaped upon the pair.
For that flushed look of pride who could blame Jo —
As on Plet's lips he did the kiss bestow?
I think we might as well own up as not —
That single life is but a dreary lot!
I'll bother you no more about our claim,
Or what the mine itself in time became —
The miner often will too much expect,
Yet our first guess was far below correct.
'Tis business here has caused me to sojourn
Until the pair from wedding trip return.
Of course they make their home in that same west

That gave Jo wealth and brought a love the best;
And I? — Yes, I am for the mountains, too;
Strange how their magic will a man pursue!
Yes, they will follow wheresoe'er you go,
As they who love them once will always know.
Another word, — to tell you all complete —
I feel again an itching in my feet;
"The Miner's Fever!" Give it once a hold,
It comes to stay, and burns in young and old:

Shall I go to the Wasatch? — Why, of course!
To keep away requires the greater force.
And yet " Our Home " I almost dread to see —
Where metal's found there comes a stern decree —
The varied beauties of the mountain wild
To serve our greed are for the time defiled;
Each sturdy worker smites and cannot spare,
He follows law and makes deep havoc there.

And in the mining camp each blast I hear,
But echoes of those others will appear —

Those that above the snowy heights were borne,
To celebrate the happy Christmas Morn,
Those blasts by which his joy the miner tells,
And which we used in lieu of Wedding Bells!

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